

The Other Side of School Choice

by Wade A. Carpenter

87

Nothing can be considered generous unless it is at the same time just.

—St. Bruno the Carthusian, ca. 1091¹

Most of us who are parents would pay an attorney a lot of money to prevent the unjust incarceration of one of our children in a confined space with psychopaths, wouldn't we? So just why are we paying the government a lot of money to unjustly incarcerate nearly all of our children in confined spaces with psychopaths? Most of us try hard to stay well clear of thieves, dope addicts, gangbangers, maniacs, and fools, don't we? So why then are we forcing our children to associate with them in institutions run by *politicians*? While most of us don't mind voluntarily helping a stranger injured on the highway, or mediating between friends who are arguing over a misunderstanding, or cleaning up after our dog has messed on our carpet, most of us resent being forced to contribute our fair share, or to take a pay cut when management is giving itself raises, or to clean up when *someone else's* dog has messed on our carpet. So why do we think it's a right to be schooled, and a kindness to require it? Am I missing something here?

Of course I am. Most of the kids with whom our children are incarcerated are not psychopaths, et cetera; there are often fine teachers standing between our children and our elected representatives; *education* is a right and a kindness, and it sometimes happens.

Hence, I view the issues surrounding public and private schooling, choice, tax credits, and vouchers with some ambivalence. I've taught in both public and private schools, my children have learned in both, and we have found strengths and weaknesses in both. I agree that increasing access to private schools will probably deprive public schools of much-needed parental involvement and support. I sympathize with those who object to paying taxes to abet religions other than their own. But I can also easily accept arguments that private and parochial schools can ren-

der public services as valuable as the public ones.² This is pretty much the same argument Horace Mann used to persuade childless citizens to support public schooling in the first place.³ And I can see the arguments that a free market might force the public schools to streamline and simplify.⁴ I concede that those who send their children to private schools for reasons of conscience are being wrongly “double-taxed,” and it troubles me that their freedom of religion is to such a large extent dependent on their ability to pay, as Stephen Vryhof’s contribution in this issue explains. In spite of the appalling headlines from the Middle East, I’m less concerned than Joe Nathan about the risk of Balkanization in the United States if we were to allow this modest step toward religious freedom. Contrary to the breezy separationist rhetoric, religion has never even come close to politics as a cause of bloodshed throughout history. And it only makes sense to me that a nation with as fragmented a set of purposes for education⁵ and a student population as diverse in culture, learning style, and aspiration⁶ as ours ought to provide a variety of instructional delivery systems and to make them as accessible as we justly can. All in all, I think the arguments for educational choice outweigh those against it.

I was therefore surprised to finish Charles Glenn’s excellent pro-choice article in this issue feeling *less* enthusiastic about tax money going to nonpublic schools than when I started it. Glenn is insightful about what it would take to make public support for private schools acceptable, with a thoughtful list of safeguards to make sure that the functional communities to be benefited are “just communities” and not unjust ones.⁷ I’ve long admired Glenn’s thinking,⁸ but as I read his article it became apparent that the “controlled choice” he advocates would lead to a dismaying increase in the same bureaucratic overload that is already bogging public schools down. It could become a patronage artist’s dream: a whole new species⁹ of administrators, starting with something like “Associate Superintendents for Schools of Choice,” followed inexorably by a deluge of assistant superintendents, deputy some-things, directors of this, ombudsmen for that, and with them, office space, secretaries, supplies, travel allowances, budgets, contracts, audits, standards, rules, goals, objectives, rubrics, accreditations, and tons and tons of paperwork, which of course will have to be submitted online (with tables) as well as in hard copy (cross-referenced).

So it was fortuitous that John Taylor Gatto’s newest book bashing the public schools, *The Underground History of American Education*,¹⁰ landed on my desk last week. Gatto, a former New York State Teacher of the Year who decided to resign and then tell the world precisely why he resigned, is another educator I have long admired.¹¹ He is right: neither public nor private schools are the answer to our problems, because

schooling itself is one of the biggest of them. The first two sentences of his annotated table of contents alone are just about worth the cost of the book plus postage:

The shocking possibility that dumb people don't exist in sufficient numbers to warrant the millions of careers devoted to tending them will seem incredible to you. Yet that is my central proposition: The mass dumbness which justifies official schooling first had to be dreamed of; it isn't real. (p. xv)

With one stunning assertion Gatto kick-started a train of thought that still has my head spinning days later. I remembered some of the miracle stories I've seen over the years—kids nobody thought could possibly “get it,” but who somehow did. Then I also remembered the whole line of nitwits from Polk County I was stuck behind on my way to work that morning. Yes, there are plenty of stupid people out there . . . but most of them probably *could* have grown some brains, given halfway decent cultivation. And then I remembered just a fraction of the wasted time, squandered money, and withered potential I have witnessed—and, all too often, imposed.

There are two mistakes readers can make with Gatto's deschooling diatribe: the first is to take it too seriously, and the second is to dismiss it too easily. This is a deeply flawed book, but I plan to require it next semester. It is not a scholarly text; it is, as Gatto insists, an essay. It is actually a screed, rife with false dichotomies, straw man arguments, unsupported assumptions, selective explanations, and quotations ripped out of context. But it is not *wrong*. Its language is inflammatory, its *ad hominem* attacks often cross the line into outright character assassination, and its simplistic explanations caused me at one point to mutter that it *ought* to be an “underground history”—buried in the back yard, next to the cat. But it is not wrong. Gatto is angry. That's okay: I'm angry too, and so, I daresay, is every humane and thoughtful teacher. But Gatto lets his anger rule him, and it shows what such anger can do to a good man with a dazzling mind. Early in the book, when he describes the impact *Moby Dick* had on him, it struck me that he himself has become a twenty-first-century Ahab, so obsessed that he is willing to sink the ship to kill the whale. John Taylor Gatto is what Michael Moore would have been had Moore not flunked his self-esteem class in middle school. But Gatto is not wrong.

Gatto is right: schools have taken on a societal centrality they do not merit, and the messianic social engineering school people have arrogated to themselves has served agendas far more sinister than most could imagine. Gatto documents a few, from the Enlightenment rationalism that will always lead the best of us to the guillotine sooner or later, to the

crude Social Darwinism of the industrial age, to the progressive sorting machine of the psychological revolution, to the soulless eugenics of the fascist era, to the sentimentalist fluff of the boomer generation, to the standards machine that threatens to make “high-level no-holds-barred, free-swinging, universal, intellectual course of study for all, full of variety, free debate, rich experience, and personalized curricula” (p. 132) impossible and even inconceivable. And he names names, beginning with Rockefeller, Carnegie, and Ford. Much of what he says has previously been described well and with greater nuance by writers including Ray Callahan, Joel Spring, Jacques Ellul, James Koerner, Christopher Lasch, Jaimie Escalante, and Marva Collins, not to mention Ayn Rand and George Orwell. (Curiously, there is no mention of Ivan Illich.) But it would be hard to find anyone who can say it more powerfully. Gatto has been there and done that, he is extremely well-read, and he is right. But like everybody else in our generously wretched industry, Gatto is also wrong: I still see teachers doing immeasurably more good than harm. So for the time being, anyway, I still support both public and private schooling and teacher education—if we are going to continue to require schooling, we ought to educate teachers in how to minimize the damage it does to children. However, I also look forward to the day when my descendants wonder just what kind of person their schoolteacher ancestor was, much as I sometimes wonder just what kind of people my slaveholder ancestors were.

I also still come down in favor of school choice, but not because public schools are bad nor because a free market is good. I favor choice because it would be generous and just, a right and a kindness, to multiply our nation’s educational offerings. The Jewish Studies Group at our Christian college, which includes professors, students, and community members, is one such offering. (I am honored to be the token gentile.) The marriage encounter group at Saint Pete’s is another. I can name several dozen such purely voluntary associations just in our middling-size town in the hills of north Georgia. Great Books clubs, blogs on the Internet, the daycare at the office, the discussion group at the local coffee shop, Scouts, the Parks & Recreation Leagues, home schools, and yes, the trivia contests at Hooters are more examples. Some get public support, and others need no money at all. Some are for profit, and others involve great sacrifice. Some require expert teachers, others provide great opportunities for retired or disillusioned teachers, and some demonstrate gloriously the age-old wisdom that the greatest teaching and learning is free. So rather than get excited about the public versus private school debate, I think I would prefer to desacralize all of them, deprofessionalize teaching, and take the compulsion and misery out of

learning. We've been missing the point for the past several centuries: there are thousands of ways to educate, and school is only one of them.

Notes

1. In St. Hugh's Charterhouse, *The Wound of Love: A Carthusian Miscellany* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1994), 9.
2. Anthony S. Bryk, Valerie E. Lee, and Peter B. Holland, *Catholic Schools and the Common Good* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); and Arthur G. Powell, *Lessons from Privilege: The American Prep School Tradition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).
3. Horace Mann, "Tenth Annual Report (1846)," in Wayne J. Urban and Jennings L. Wagoner, *American Education: A History*, 3rd ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2004), 101–103.
4. See John E. Chubb and Terry M. Moe, *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools* (New York: Brookings Institution Press, 1990) for a start.
5. Excellent treatments of the fragmentation of purpose are to be found in whatever edition you wish of Joel Spring's *American Education* (Boston: McGraw-Hill), and his *Conflict of Interests: The Politics of American Education*, 2nd ed. (New York: Longman, 1993).
6. See any decent educational psychology textbook, and look in the index for "Howard Gardner" for good material on multiple intelligences. The literature on learning styles is equally rich. And for the cultural and aspirational issues, see any good Foundations textbook. I recommend Joseph Newman's *America's Teachers: An Introduction to Education*, 3rd ed. (New York: Longman, 1999).
7. James S. Coleman and Thomas Hoffer's *Public and Private High Schools: The Impact of Communities* (New York: Basic Books, 1987) gives a good introduction to the concept and educational value of functional communities. See B. L. Bull, R. T. Frueling, and V. Chattergy's *The Ethics of Multicultural and Bilingual Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1992) for as good an education-focused account of "just community" reasoning as I've seen. Michael Walzer, Robert Bellah, and Amitai Etzioni have written splendidly along that line in the literature of other disciplines.
8. Especially see Charles A. Glenn, *The Myth of the Common School* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987).
9. Species, *n.*, "A fundamental category of taxonomic classification, ranking below a genus or subgenus and consisting of related organisms capable of interbreeding"—*American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed.
10. New York: Oxford Village Press, 2004.
11. See his *Dumbing Us Down: The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Schooling* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1992).

Wade A. Carpenter, Ph.D., is the chair of the education department at Berry College, Mount Berry, Georgia.